

"THEN SHALL THE KING SAY UNTO THEM ON HIS RIGHT HAND, COME, YE BLESSED OF MY FATHER, INHERIT THE KINGDOM PREPARED FOR YOU FROM THE FOUNDATION OF THE WORLD. FOR I WAS HUNGRY, AND YOU GAVE ME MEAT. I WAS THIRSTY, AND YOU GAVE ME DRINK. I WAS A STRANGER AND YOU TOOK ME IN. NAKED, AND YOU CLOTHED ME. I WAS SICK, AND YOU VISITED ME. I WAS IN PRISON, AND YOU CAME UNTO ME." (St. Matthew 25:34-36)

THE ROLE OF THE CHURCH AND THE SURVIVAL PROGRAM

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(In this article I am speaking primarily about the role of the Black Church. However, the specific steps mentioned later on in the article apply to white, brown, red and yellow churchmen as well.)

The Black Church was born over 350 years ago, engaged in a survival program. The Black Church was born out of an effort to deal with the concrete conditions and needs of Black People. It was born in an attempt to enable and empower Black People to survive the racist and exploitative system of slavery in America. Its mission and purpose today is the same as it was 350 years ago, although at a higher level. That mission and purpose is to see to it that Black People and other oppressed peoples survive, with dignity and humanity, American racism and capitalism.

To understand the role of the Black Church in the survival program we must get an historical perspective of the Black Church. Historically, the period from 1619, when the first slaves were brought to America, to 1831 can be called "the period of Christianizing the slaves." Blacks who had been captured, kidnapped, brought to America, and enslaved were baptized and made Christians. Although some white, so-called Christians genuinely believed that Christianity was the religion for all people, most Americans saw Christianity as a means to control slaves and to keep them obedient and docile. Some Christian slaves were obedient and docile. But others, who had learned how to read, began to read the Old Testament (the first 39 books of the Bible) and discovered that God was against slavery and oppression in any form. Furthermore, they discovered that God inspired men to develop survival programs for oppressed people—including wars of liberation.

What followed next was the birth of the Black Church and the development of survival programs for the slaves. During the period 1619-1831, Black

Christian slaves began to have secret meetings late at night, or in the hours just before dawn. Sneaking away from the slave quarters, they would assemble deep in the woods or swamps, and listen to one of their membership begin to preach about justice, freedom, and liberation as being the will of God.

These secret meetings, called "hush-harbor meetings", consisted not only of praising, preaching, and praying, but planning, plotting, and practicing slave escapes and slave rebellions. Literally hundreds of slaves escaped to the Northern states, or into Canada as a result of plans initiated and carried out at the secret meetings. Most notable of the many slave rebellions planned at the secret meetings were those of the Rev. Gabriel Prosser in 1802 at Richmond, Virginia; The Rev. Denmark Vesey in 1823 at Charleston, South Carolina; and The Rev. Nat Turner in 1831 at South Hampton County, Virginia.

The secret meetings, and their subsequent events, gave birth to the Black Church and to the survival program for Blacks. Indeed, the Black Church and the survival program were one and the same. The Black Church was the survival program, and the survival program--of heightening the level of awareness of the slaves, planning, and carrying out slave escapes and rebellions--was the Black Church in operation.

The rebellion led by the Rev. Nat Turner in 1831 began a second period in the role of the Black Church/survival program. The second period was that of the direct control of the Black Church. It covered the years from 1831 to the end of the Civil War. Although only 55-60 whites were killed in the Rev. Turner's rebellion, it was enough to strike fear into the hearts of white slave owners. In response to the Rev. Turner's rebellion, whites began to take more repressive measures against the Black Church because they knew that Black preachers,

and church members were instrumental in slave escapes and rebellions. Measures were taken wherein Blacks were not allowed to worship unless a white person was present; a Black preacher was not allowed to lead a congregation in worship unless he preached only about "the hereafter", and a white observer was present. Some Black congregations were not allowed to worship unless a white minister led them. Still other Black congregations were forced to worship together with whites--not for the sake of integration--but so that whites could keep their eyes on them.

Yet, despite these restrictions the Black Church still continued to engage in the survival program of making slaves aware of their oppressive conditions and of helping slaves to escape. In attempting to lift the level of awareness of Blacks, the Rev. Henry Highland Garnet in 1848 said in a sermon for slaves, "Brethren, it is as wrong for your lordly oppressors to keep you in slavery as it was for the man-thief to steal our ancestors from the coast of Africa. You should nowhere use the same manner of resistance as would have been just in our ancestors when the bloody foot-prints of the first remorseless soul-thief were placed upon the shores of our fatherland. The humblest peasant is as free in the sight of God as the proudest monarch that ever swayed a sceptre. Liberty is a spirit sent from God and, like its great Author, is no respecter of persons. Brethren, the time has

come when you must act for yourselves. It is an old and true saying that, 'if hereditary bondmen would be free, the must themselves strike the blow.' The Rev. J. W. Loggen speaking in 1850 in response to the Fugitive Slave Law said, "I don't respect the Fugitive Slave Law--I don't fear it--I won't obey it! It outlaws me, and I outlaw it and the men who attempt to enforce it on me."

While such men were carrying out the aspect of the survival program designed to set Black minds straight, other aspects of the survival program were being carried out by churches in the Northern states. Slaves who had escaped to the North established churches. These churches became waystations for the Underground Railroad. They became places through which escaped slaves could get established in the North, or continue on to Canada, or if possible, to Africa. Northern Black churches found homes, food, clothing, and jobs for escaped slaves. Thus, the scope of the survival program expanded to fulfilling the daily, basic, human needs of Blacks who had escaped from the South.

The period following the Civil War affected the role of the Black Church drastically. During Reconstruction Blacks were recruited from the Churches for political offices. Much effort, energy, talent, and interest that had been in the Black Church was siphoned off into the political arena. The role of the Black Church was

weakened.

With the end of Reconstruction and the emergence of Jim Crow, the Black Church gradually became a means of escape, rather than a means of protest. The oppressive federal, state and local governments and the capitalist system said that Blacks were exploited, manipulated, and discriminated against by Jim Crow laws not because they were Black, but because they were ignorant, immoral, and lazy. Blacks were told that they could enjoy freedom if they took on white, capitalist values. So the passion for freedom and survival with dignity became replaced by sermons against drinking, dancing, smoking, and which extolled education, working, and trying to stay on the good side of the oppressor. The survival program of the Black Church took on the nature of "just tryin' to make it" in the face of oppression, rather than trying to change the conditions of oppression. Injustices and oppression of this life were overlooked in favor of "a land flowing with milk and honey" beyond this world.

Because the Black Church was no longer the leader of protest against injustice and oppression, civil rights groups developed to pick up the fight. Notable civil rights groups which emerged are, of course, the Niagara Movement, which, after infiltration by white liberals, became the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People; the Congress of Racial Equality; the Urban League; and the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee. The Black Church once again affirmed its rightful purpose in the person of The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and the organization of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. Two organizations formed in 1965 and 1966 which moved the liberation struggle to a higher level, were the Deacons for Defense and Justice, and the Black Panther Party.

At this point it must be said that the Black Church and Black preachers are not to be universally condemned for their actions or inactions during this period. Many Black preachers and congregations were very active in the fight for human rights. Many churches were bombed as a result of their involvement in the Black Liberation Movement. Many Black preachers were threatened, beaten, jailed, and some murdered because of their involvement.

We can even understand those who were not involved in the movement for human rights. In a hostile white world without any power to make whites recognize Blacks as persons, the Black Church and Black preachers developed a means of survival. That means was to offer hope and strength to meet and to live through the humiliations and dehumanizations which Black People encountered daily.

We can understand this; but understanding is not enough. Understanding doesn't take Black People and other

oppressed peoples out of the alleys and ghettos; understanding offers no protection in the face of bullets fired by the nervous National Guard; understanding doesn't drown out the sickening thud of a policeman's nightstick coming down on someone's head; understanding does not fill an empty stomach; understanding does not take the place of clothes on the back and shoes on the feet; understanding is no substitute for a decent house or apartment; understanding does not dispense justice in the courts; understanding does not change inhuman prison conditions. The Black Church, i.e. Black preachers, church members, and friends must move beyond mere understanding of how and why the Black Church was neutralized and compromised in its leadership role of Black survival.

The Black Church must once again recapture the spirit of freedom and passion for survival that gave it its beginning. In so doing it will be participating with the Black Panther Party's survival program. As steps to do this I suggest the following:

1. Black preachers have to set the minds straight of their congregation. (Congregations may have to do the same thing to their preacher!) Black preachers have got to stop preaching about a kingdom in the hereafter which is "a land flowing with milk and honey" (such a diet would only result in diarrhea anyway!) We must deal with concrete conditions and survival in this life! We have to stop preaching from passages in the Bible which say, "slaves, be obedient to your masters". (Ephesians 6:5), and, "...when you do right and suffer for it you take it patiently, this is acceptable with God". (1 Peter 2:20). We must draw our sermons from the words of the prophets who say, "Thus says the Lord, execute justice in the morning, and deliver from the hand of the oppressor him who has been robbed." (Jeremiah 21:11,12), and, "Hear this word you who oppress the poor, who crush the needy, the Lord God has sworn that the days are coming when they shall take you away with hooks, even the last of you with fishhooks." (Amos 4:1,2).

We must not let our congregations think that the only reason to attend church is to sing and pray. During our worship services we must use these times as opportunities to heighten the level of awareness of our people. God, speaking through the prophet, Amos, deals with this point when he says, "I hate, I despise your feasts, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies... Take away from me the noise of your songs; to the melody of your harps I will not listen. But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an overflowing stream." (Amos 5:21-24). As Black preachers we have to constantly drive

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DYNAMITE FOUND IN PYRAMID COURT-CAIRO, ILL.

Cairo, Ill., April 27, 1971 ---- "The dynamite and other explosives found in a concrete block building near the Mississippi River levee and about 100 yards from Pyramid Court was meant to kill the Black people living in this project," was the statement and general feeling of many of the residents in the alt-Black housing project.

State police today discovered what one state policeman said was "enough explosives to blow away the complete West end of Pyramid Court." Among items included in the find and as shown by state police to officials of the United Front were about 50 sticks of dynamite, three pipe bombs loaded with Black powder and finishing nails, tear gas bombs, other home made bombs, detonators, 45 caliber and 30.06 caliber ammunition (Close to 1,000 rounds in all,) and other items.

Speculation in the Black community is that white vigilantes, who have already fired into the housing project on 150



United Front leader Rev. Charles Koen

nights (and many of the shots fired have come into Pyramid Court from the direction of the building in which the explosives were discovered.) meant to use these against Blacks living in the housing

project. They feel that since the explosives were wired electrically, the bombers would have set off explosions at night, and then when people came out of their homes would have set off the bombs filled with nails, so that others would have been wounded. Then, the Blacks feel, the whites would have used the ammunition to fire on other Blacks who might still be on the scene.

The Rev. Charles Koen, executive director of the United Front of Cairo said that it is obvious that Black people, had they even possessed any explosives, would not have stashed them so close to the project in which close to 1,000 men and women and children live. He said that accusations of Blacks doing such things would be outrageous. The types of bombs seemed to be meant to be used against people and not buildings which gives credence to the speculation by Blacks according to the Front leader.

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home the reality and concrete condition of our oppression as a people and that this oppression is against the will of God. And, as we all know, "God don't like ugly!" We also know that oppression is as ugly as you can get.

2. Churches can participate with the survival program of the Black Panther Party by allowing the use of their buildings as places where the survival programs can be implemented. Church buildings can be sites for Free Breakfast Programs, Liberation Schools, Health Clinics, depositories for food and clothing, and for meetings. St. Augustine's has been used for the past three years by the Black Panther Party for such programs.

3. Churches can sponsor or co-sponsor with the Black Panther Party the different specific survival programs. In January, 1969, St. Augustine's co-sponsored the first Free Breakfast Program with the Black Panther Party. Church congregations can sponsor or co-sponsor food, clothing, and health programs. Churches have a

tax exempt and non-profit status. This status should be used in order to serve the people. This status could definitely be used in establishing food, clothing, or housing cooperatives.

4. Church resources can be utilized to serve the needs of the people. Such resources would include money and skills of church members. A "talent bank" listing the expertise, talents, and skills of church members can be maintained. St. Augustine's has one and it is used. The "talent bank" would list those who were teachers, carpenters, doctors, seamstresses, lawyers, cooks, etc. Whenever implementation of a specific survival program required certain expertise, those listed in the "talent bank" with that expertise could be called upon for their services.

5. Preachers and church members can visit inmates in the prisons. They can also help to arrange transportation for families of inmates so that they can visit with their relatives and loved ones who are imprisoned.

These are just a few basic involvements that can be carried out by

churches.

In conclusion, the heritage of the Black Church has been inextricably bound together with the survival of Black People and with bringing an end to oppression and exploitation. Therefore, to say that the church--and Black Church in particular--has a role to play in the survival program of the Black Panther Party is nothing new. The Black Panther Party from 1966 through the present has merely put into operation the survival program that the Church should have been doing anyway. The efforts of the Black Panther Party are consistent with what God wants. God is going to judge preachers, church members, and everyone else not for their piety or lack of it, but by our relationship to each other which is established through the survival program of the Black Panther Party. In St. Matthew 25:34-36 this truth is verified. In this Bible passage we find the criteria that God is going to judge by, "Then shall the King say unto them on his right hand, Come, ye blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world: for I was hungry, and you gave me meat: I was thirsty, and you gave me drink: I was a stranger and you took me in: Naked, and you clothed me: I was sick, and you visited me: I was in prison, and you came unto me." (St. Matthew 25:34-36). Isn't this what the survival program of the Black Panther Party is all about?!!

The Church, The Black Panther Party, and even those who belong to neither group can work together to successfully implement the survival program. The only requirement is that we all are committed to the destruction of oppression and exploitation, so that we can return ALL POWER TO THE PEOPLE!

DYNAMITE FOUND IN PYRAMID COURTS

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"State Police 'happened' to come upon the explosives," said the Rev. Koen. "We feel that these state officials are afraid of the future of Cairo, with the election of white vigilantes to office in the city commission. This find is part of their attempt to stop what they see will be total bloodshed by these whites."

According to spokesmen of the Front, Black people of Cairo are apprehensive of what the newly elected officials in the city might attempt against the Black community. They believe this discovery of explosives is only one of many events to come in which the white vigilantes will move with violence against Blacks in Cairo.

"White merchants have tried all things to stop the 2 year old economic boycott of their stores. The elections of these whitehat officials was a major victory for the merchants. They have given the orders to stop Blacks in whatever ways are necessary. This find today will only slow them a bit. When the new officials take office, anything can happen," said the Rev. Koen. He added that the United Front will remain nonviolent, and will continue to rebuild the city through many areas of economic development. (Black leaders from community, state and National organizations will participate in the 2nd Annual National Solidarity in Cairo, Ill., June 19, 1971.)

A pistol lies clearly in view near bullet-riddled window within easy reach of the home's occupants, a black family terrorized for many months. Shot reportedly came from Cairo police station.

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Save Black People



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United Front
Cairo, Illinois

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